

Colic in Horses



Equine Colic

Equine colic is a relatively common disorder of the digestive system. Although the term colic, in the true definition of the word, simply means “abdominal pain,” the term in horses refers to a condition of severe abdominal discomfort characterized by pawing, rolling, and sometimes the inability to defecate.

There are a handful of different types of colic, depending on the cause of the condition. There is also a spectrum of severity in this condition; oftentimes a horse may have a mild bout of abdominal pain that resolves with a single dose of medication whereas other times, surgery and unfortunately euthanasia may be warranted. For this reason, all colic should be treated as an emergency.

If you suspect your horse is displaying colic symptoms, seek immediate veterinary assistance. There are different treatment options for horses suffering from colic, but this is an illness in which course and treatment can really vary on a case-by-case basis.

Symptoms and Types

As previously stated, there are various forms of equine colic. However, most horses with this condition display the following symptoms:

Anxiety or depression

- Pawing at the ground
- Looking at the flank
- Rolling or wanting to lie down
- Playing in the water bucket but not drinking
- Lack of defecation
- Lack of appetite
- Excessive sweating
- Abnormally high pulse rate (over 50 beats per minute)
- Lack of normal gut noises
- Frequent attempts to urinate

Signs that are more specific to the type include:

Spasmodic (or gas) Colic

- Sweating
- Sporadic gut pain
- Loud gut sounds
- Overly restless and anxious
- Frequent attempts to roll

Impaction Colic

- No fecal production
- Chronic pain in abdomen
- Dark mucous membranes
- Reluctance to eat
- Extended periods of laying down
- Impacted colon
- Drop in temperature (as disease progresses)

Causes

Spasmodic (or gas) Colic

- Excessive gas accumulation in colon causes acute pain

Impaction Colic

- Heavy internal parasitism
- Dehydration (not enough fluid to keep ingesta moving through the gut)
- Excessive ingestion of sand
- Pedunculated lipoma (fatty benign tumor of the gut which restricts flow of ingesta)

- Enterolith or fecalith (stones in the digestive tract)

Diagnosis

You should become familiar with the symptoms of colic to quickly identify the condition. Knowing how to take your horse's vital signs (heart rate, respiratory rate, and mucus membrane color) is important information to relay to your veterinarian. A stethoscope to listen for gut sounds is also a wise investment to have in your emergency kit in the barn.

Once your veterinarian has arrived, there are a variety of diagnostic procedures he/she will do to confirm colic and further characterize its cause and severity. First, the veterinarian will check the horse's pulse, temperature, mucus membrane color, and evaluate the gut sounds. Your vet will ask you detailed questions on the horse's most recent behavior. Then the vet may sedate the horse. This will make the horse more comfortable and make it safer to perform more invasive diagnostics.

The veterinarian may then perform a rectal exam. This exam allows the vet to actually palpate the large colon of the horse to determine if any portions are overextended due to a buildup of gas or if a portion of the colon is twisted. The vet may also insert a nasogastric (NG) tube. This is a long plastic tube that is inserted through the horse's nostril and down his esophagus into the stomach. This allows the vet to administer fluids directly into the stomach (such as water and electrolytes or mineral oil).

Occasionally, your vet may perform an abdominocentesis (belly tap) to collect and analyze fluid that has accumulated in the abdominal cavity of the horse.

Treatment

Depending of the type of colic a horse has, there are different treatment options. Analgesics such as flunixin meglumine (banamine) are used in every colic case to help control the abdominal pain that can be quite severe. A nasogastric tube may also be used to relieve the amount of gas pressure in the gut, giving gas and fluids an avenue to travel away from the gut. IV fluids may be necessary if the horse is dehydrated or in shock.

If the horse is suffering from impaction colic, the goal of treatment is to remove the impaction. Usually, administration of mineral oil or another type of laxative is used to help dislodge the impaction. Usually the horse is held off-feed until he has defecated, which indicates that the impaction has passed.

If the veterinarian suspects there is a twist in a loop of bowel, surgery is required. The outcome of surgical colic cases is extremely dependent on how long the colic has been going on, the age and condition of the horse, as well as the location of the problem within the digestive tract.

Living and Management

Usually, colic cases are easily resolved on the farm with minimal intervention. As the horse is being treated, access to food should be denied and supportive care should be implemented per your vet's recommendations. After recovery, return your horse to work slowly and watch carefully for any reoccurring signs of abdominal pain.

Prevention

Occasionally, a horse will colic for no apparent reason. In such a case, the best prevention is to know your horse's habits so that you may prevent a colic episode in the future. Other preventative aspects include:

- Always make sure your horse has plenty of access to fresh, clean water. In the winter, horses are more susceptible to impaction colic, as they do not like to drink ice cold water, or the water in the trough was frozen so the horse has no access to it. In cold climates, regularly check to make sure there is no ice buildup in the water buckets, or install water heaters.
- Ensure your horse has enough access to roughage in his diet, such as pasture or hay. This part of a horse's natural diet provides the bulk needed for proper gut motility.
- Make sure your horse has regular dental check-ups to ensure there are no sharp points or missing teeth that prevent him from grinding his food properly.
- In the spring, slowly introduce your horse to lush pasture. Do not let him out to graze full time on new spring grass all at once.